



M U L T I S T A T E

[Mississippi lawmakers receive thousands in gifts from lobbyists for universities](#)

(Mississippi)

Lobbyists for Mississippi’s public universities handed out \$500 football and basketball ticket packages, picked up the tabs on \$150-per-plate dinners, and gave out freebies like golf shirts and a football helmet display case to influential lawmakers.

From 2019 through this year’s legislative session, lobbyists for six of Mississippi’s eight public universities gave out almost \$100,000 in gifts to lawmakers and other public officials, a Daily Journal review of lobbying filings found. More than half of that total was free tickets to sporting events, with free meals also covering a large portion. All of the spending is legal under state law.

This makes public universities – which say private foundations largely cover their lobbying costs – among the top spenders of any lobbying interest group at the Capitol. Some argue it’s time for Mississippi to follow the example of other states that have reigned in lobbyist gift-giving. Others question if the lobbying efforts are working as budgets remain unpredictable and tuition continues to rise.

“There’s a fine line between a bribe and a gift,” said Sen. Chris McDaniel, R-Ellisville, who has pushed for more lobbying transparency and restrictions in the state. He said he’s not suggesting lobbyist gifts are intended as bribes, but they “can be very influential.”

Lawmakers get thousands of dollars in tickets, meals

Sen. Rita Potts Parks, R-Corinth, chairs the Senate Higher Education Committee. She received 39 gifts worth a total of \$5,752 – the most of any Northeast Mississippi lawmaker since 2019.

The handouts included a \$2,220 ticket package for last year’s Ole Miss football game against the University of Alabama and \$550 in tickets to the 2019 football game against the University of Arkansas. Parks, an Ole Miss graduate, also got a \$132 dinner last year and another meal with her husband valued at \$98 per plate, both paid for by lobbyists for the university.

Parks did not respond to the Daily Journal's requests for comment.

The elected official who received the largest sum of gifts of anyone was Rep. Jim Beckett, R-Bruce, who got 72 payments worth \$8,091. Beckett is chairman of the Elections Committee and serves on the Appropriations Committee but is not part of the House's higher education panel.

Beckett, an Ole Miss graduate, explained that he is a season ticket holder for the school's football and baseball teams, but he often winds up sitting with other university officials and lawmakers in the university's skybox or other designated seating. He said that means he gets counted as receiving lots of free tickets, often valued at \$100 or more apiece.

"They have to report me as using their tickets and not using mine," said Beckett, who added he is close with the university's lobbyist, Perry Sansing, with whom he attended college.

Beckett also received a number of gifts from both Mississippi State and Southern Miss.

"I don't favor one university over the other because somebody gave me a ticket somewhere, I can tell you that," Beckett said.

Ole Miss officials did not respond to a request for comment.

MSU, USM do not provide details of gifts

In many cases, it's unclear what the university lobbyists gave out. Reports for Mississippi State and the University of Southern Mississippi did not include a description for more than 750 gifts given to lawmakers and officials, only their values.

The values of the gifts ranged from \$1 to \$190 and totaled more than \$29,000.

Lobbyists for other companies and groups also sometimes fail to describe what they are buying for elected officials in their public reports.

This lack of transparency appears to violate Mississippi's lobbying law, which says reports must include a description of gifts "with sufficient detail so that the nature of the transfer is clear."

A spokeswoman for the Secretary of State's Office, which collects and posts the lobbying filings, said officials were not aware of the unlabeled gifts issue until the Daily Journal asked about it, but "we will absolutely look into the matter."

Chad Driskell, Southern Miss' lobbyist and vice president for external affairs, said all of his university's unlabeled gifts were either free sports tickets or meals, adding the university "obviously" does not give cash payments to elected officials.

Mississippi State officials did not respond to a request for comment.

University gift-giving isn't new

Mississippi university lobbyists wining and dining lawmakers and doling out free tickets isn't a new phenomenon, nor is such spending unique to higher education lobbying efforts.

From 2015 to 2018, they handed out \$276,000 in freebies, according to [previous Clarion Ledger reporting](#). Notable gifts in that period included \$174 Ruth's Chris Steak House dinners, sports memorabilia gifts worth \$376, and \$13,000 worth of tickets provided to lawmakers for the 2016 Sugar Bowl.

But it is unclear how much universities have gotten out of their lobbying efforts, which they have said are mostly paid for with private foundation funds.

Legislative appropriations for the schools have fluctuated up and down in recent years, just like other agencies. Meanwhile, tuition costs have steadily risen.

The schools often compete for funding for projects through borrowing in the Legislature's bond bill. This year the universities secured more than \$85 million in borrowing for projects such as dormitory upgrades, classroom improvements and equipping a new dining facility.

Other states pass 'no cup of coffee' laws

Lobbying laws around the country vary significantly. Some states like Mississippi have no restrictions on gifts, as long as they don't directly influence official actions. Some states impose a cap on how much an official can get from a lobbyist. And an increasing number of states have banned gifts altogether, known as no cup of coffee laws, in an effort to cut the amount of money flowing through politics.

John Reeves, a Jackson attorney and longtime former legislator, helped push through the state's existing lobbying regulations and public reporting requirements in the 1990s. Those changes helped reign in some of the biggest freebies, he said, like luxury trips and lobbyists paying for lawmakers' rent. Both Reeves and Beckett also mentioned lawmakers in the past who used a lobbyist's credit card to buy their own dinners or other items, whenever they pleased.

Reeves said more reforms are needed.

"It just doesn't look right," he said of gifts and meals. "The image of a proponent of (legislation) buying a steak dinner for someone the night before the vote, and then the person votes that way, is bad."

Reeves proposed a two-pronged solution. The Legislature should pass a no cup of coffee bill, he said. But at the same time, they should raise their salary or per-diem rate for days when they are in session, which currently stands at \$23,500 and \$151 per day respectively. He said this would ensure the average Mississippian could afford to serve in public office without the free lobbyist meals and gifts.

"We need to get away from lobbyists at the national level, at the state level, at the local level, providing anything of value to any member who can vote on their issue," Reeves said.

McDaniel, who has unsuccessfully pushed his own lobbying reforms in recent years, agrees. He said the freebies and expensive meals "sends the wrong signal to regular Mississippians," who can't afford such luxuries.

McDaniel supports a no cup of coffee law. Another approach, he said, could be adding another layer of transparency – requiring lobbying reports to be posted on each lawmaker's biography page, "right next to their committee assignments." But McDaniel is also realistic about whether his colleagues will want to scale back the free stuff they receive.

"I think it stands about the same chance as term limits," he said of lobbying reforms.

His past efforts never made it out of committee.

[Parson vetoes bills amending Sunshine law, allowing lobbyist campaign committees](#) (Missouri)

Gov. Mike Parson vetoed four bills Friday afternoon, including one that would have created new exceptions to the state's open records law and another that aimed to allow registered lobbyists to maintain campaign committees.

[House Bill 362](#), sponsored by Rep. Bruce DeGroot, R-Ellisville, would have allowed constituents' contact information to be closed under Missouri's Sunshine Law if it was submitted to a government body solely to receive routine communications such as newsletters, notifications, advisories, alerts and periodic reports. Redacting contact info is an issue both Gov. Mike Parson and lawmakers [have previously been challenged on](#).

Over the course of the session the bill grew to include transparency provisions that would also shield individually identifiable customer usage and billing records from municipally-owned utilities, waive charges for defendants seeking a police report, probable cause statement or video footage related to proceedings before a municipal court, and establish a 30-day timeline for payment of fees to receive public records.

If a requester failed to provide the necessary fees, the records request would be considered withdrawn, and a government body would be authorized to request additional fees if a similar request was submitted within six months after the 30-day window, the bill stipulated.

In [Parson's veto letter](#), he cited [the Missouri Supreme Court's ruling last month](#) in a lawsuit against his office, that found public governmental bodies cannot condition the provision of a date and time to receive records on payment of a fee.

An additional provision would allow the Office of the Child Advocate, which investigates complaints against the Children's Division in the Missouri Department of Social Services and reviews allegations of abuse, to create a reporting system for Children's Division employees to confidentially report info on the safety of children or staff.

Any criminal acts reported through it would be disclosed to the appropriate law enforcement entities. Another provision notes the office is not prevented from releasing findings on the professional performance of multidisciplinary team members that investigate allegations of child abuse and neglect, which can include prosecutors, Children's Division investigators, police and more.

The Department of Social Services' handling of cases of suspected abuse and neglect [came under intense scrutiny this legislative session](#) as lawmakers [investigated the state's lack of oversight of unlicensed youth residential facilities](#) where substantiated reports of abuse and neglect had been found.

In his veto letter, Parson wrote the expanded authority the bill would have granted to the Office of Child Advocate fails to recognize the accountability local multidisciplinary team members provide and “unnecessarily undermines the existing administrative structure” within the Children’s Division. Parson deemed the provision duplicative of multidisciplinary team efforts and wrote that it “fails to strengthen protections for the children served by” the division.

Rep. Mary Elizabeth Coleman, an Arnold Republican who had offered the provision as an amendment to other legislation during the session, thanked the Office of Child Advocate for its work Friday.

“They step in when our child welfare system has failed,” Coleman [wrote on Twitter](#). “They are a trusted partner helping keep kids safe and holding people accountable when it hasn’t.”

Last week, Parson [also vetoed a \\$2.1 million increase to the Department of Social Services’ budget](#) that would have provided a three percent pay increase to Children’s Division case workers and supervisors — an area that [often sees high turnover](#).

The bill would also establish the “Government Lending Transparency Act,” and require government agencies to annually report on lending and credit support programs to the State Auditor’s office.

Parson wrote that the Auditor’s office already has the authority to ensure state funds are properly accounted for and that with an effective date of Aug. 28, requirements in the bill that specify reports are submitted by August 30 are “impractical.”

Parson also vetoed [House Bill 685](#), sponsored by Rep. Jason Chipman, R-Steelville. The bill, which included provisions altering the requirements to run for local office, was vetoed due to a provision that would have allowed a registered lobbyist who holds or is campaigning for an elected municipal or school district position to maintain their candidate campaign committee.

The provision would have only affected a small number of lobbyists, like Columbia Mayor Brain Treece, who has also been a registered lobbyist since 1996. A complaint filed with the Missouri Ethics Commission in 2019 [requested the commission investigate whether he was violating state law](#) that said registered lobbyists were required to dissolve campaign committees and disburse the funds.

Parson said [in his veto letter](#) he strongly opposed the provision.

“I do not believe that such special laws, which are designed to benefit a few, should guide our state policy,” Parson wrote. “Although this provision would create a narrow exception for registered lobbyists holding elected office, it would inevitably lead to increased potential for conflicts of interest in local offices and open the door to additional exemptions in the future.”

Report shows \$18 million in lobbyist earnings at Legislature (Nebraska)

While gross earnings for lobbyists at the Nebraska Legislature decreased by nearly a million dollars in 2020 because of the COVID-19 pandemic, they still reached a sturdy \$18.6 million, Common Cause Nebraska stated Monday in its annual lobbying report.

"In fact, lobbyist compensation increased for more than half of our Top Ten firms," the detailed report compiled by Common Cause issues chairman Jack Gould said.

"Although COVID-19 has placed some limits on lobbying," he said, "lobbyists continue to have a huge impact on our state government.

"With term limits, legislators come and go, but the lobby remains always there ready to help a senator with a drink, a dinner, a campaign contribution and maybe a little help with some legislation."

In 2020, the report stated, 367 compensated lobbyists actively lobbied Nebraska's 49 state senators.

Accountability and disclosure records indicated that lobbyist food and entertainment expenses for senators totaled \$74,576, but food and beverage expense reports do not identify individual senators.

Once again, Mueller Robak topped the list of lobbying firms in terms of lobbying income at \$1,353,593, edging out Radcliffe and Associates at \$1,341,262.

O'Hara Lindsay also topped the million-dollar mark at \$1,033,553.

California elected officials would have to disclose their connections under proposed rule (California)

In the months before California lawmakers in June granted prison guards a \$5,000 bonus and an 8% raise over the next two years, the guards' union made a few charitable donations. The

recipients included two nonprofits run by the very legislators who were preparing to vote on the pay hikes.

State senators who lead the Legislature's Black and Latino caucuses asked the correctional officers' union to donate to the foundations they run — and the union complied, [state records show](#), giving \$15,000 in March to the foundation run by the Latino caucus and \$60,000 over February and March to the Black caucus' foundation.

Donations like this — from groups that lobby the Legislature, to nonprofits controlled by legislators, their staff and family members — have been under scrutiny by California's political watchdog since [CalMatters reported last year that they've become an increasingly common way for politicians to raise and spend money](#) outside the limits of the state's strict campaign finance laws.

The investigation found a dozen nonprofits run by state lawmakers and their staffs had reported raising nearly \$3 million in 2019; that a nonprofit tied to the legislature's [technology caucus was keeping its donations secret](#); and that a lawmaker — now-Attorney General [Rob Bonta](#) — [routinely asked interest groups to donate to his personal foundation as well as to nonprofits that employed his wife](#).

The money largely comes from corporations and unions with business before the Legislature, who can get a tax break for giving to charity while also currying favor with influential politicians. While the nonprofit recipients may perform charitable work, they also pay for lawmakers to take trips abroad, enjoy steak dinners with tech executives in Silicon Valley and spend weekends schmoozing with lobbyists at the Disneyland Hotel.

Now, after a year of [reviewing whether to change the rules governing the transactions known as "behested payments,"](#) on Thursday the Fair Political Practices Commission is scheduled to discuss new regulations:

- One would require officials to disclose when they ask interest groups to give money to charities that the politicians or their family members control or are employed by.
- Another would require officials to disclose when they are involved in a decision that impacts the person or group making the charitable donation at their request.

“These are relationships that raise concerns about the self-interest of the official and the possibility of undue influence or access for the payee as a result of the payment,” the [commission staff wrote in a report explaining the proposed rules](#). “As such, these are relationships with a potential for influence or self-dealing that the public would want to have disclosed.”

The [Fair Political Practices Commission is expected to vote](#) on the proposed rules this fall. The commission is limited in how drastically it can change the rules on behested payments, which can only be banned or significantly overhauled with legislation.

Proposal includes a major carve-out

The rule requiring disclosure of official decisions that impact the donor comes with a large caveat: It does not include legislation. That means the rule wouldn't change anything for state lawmakers who routinely vote on bills affecting the businesses and unions they hit up for donations to their nonprofits.

Richard Miadich, chairperson of the Fair Political Practices Commission, said legislation should be treated differently because its impact is usually broad, not crafted in a way that bestows specific perks to individuals or interest groups. Asked about the example of the prison guards union donating to lawmakers' charities just before lawmakers voted on their raise and bonus — a contract the Legislature's own analyst described as [providing "substantial compensation increases... without clear justification"](#) — Miadich said existing disclosure is sufficient.

He does, however, want to see more transparency in situations where, for example, a city council is deciding the fate of a permit sought by a developer who makes donations to a council member's charity.

"We need to have a balanced, deliberate approach," Miadich said in an interview Monday. "I really believe that behested payments do a lot of good to a lot of worthy causes. And I do not want to inadvertently interrupt that, particularly coming out of a global pandemic."

By contrast, the rule requiring disclosure of donations to nonprofits controlled by politicians and their family members would seem to impact several elected officials at the Capitol. Gov. Gavin Newsom has reported raising \$881,297 for the California Partners Project, a nonprofit run by his wife Jennifer Siebel Newsom.

Lawmakers routinely ask donors to give to nonprofits run by their legislative caucuses and in some cases, their family members. Assemblymember Blanca Rubio, a Democrat from Baldwin Park who wields significant power to kill progressive bills as the leader of a bloc of moderate Democrats, reported raising \$62,000 for the Rubio Foundation, which is run by her sister Sylvia Rubio. Donors include pharmaceutical, petroleum and dialysis companies that routinely lobby at the Capitol.

“When I vote, it’s about the issue, not about who’s giving me money or who hasn’t,” Rubio told CalMatters. “And I’m very clear with them... that the one does not have to do with the other.”

Rubio pointed out that most donations she requested went to other nonprofits that were not her sister’s. The money she raised for her sister’s foundation helped put on a turkey giveaway at Thanksgiving and fund field trips for kids from a low-income school, Rubio said. She had no objections to the political watchdog’s proposed rule that would require additional disclosure from her.

“I’m happy to follow all the rules,” she said.

Bonta, a Democrat who was [appointed attorney general in March](#), formed his own nonprofit called the Bonta California Progress Foundation in 2017, when he was an assemblyman. He reported raising \$132,500 to it between 2017 and 2020 and said the money has supported dozens of scholarships for students in his district. Last year, CalMatters reported that [Bonta paid \\$25,000 from his foundation to the nonprofit where his wife worked](#), and helped her employers raise more than \$560,000, largely by soliciting donations from companies that lobby the Legislature. The practice is legal, but [political ethics experts called it inappropriate](#).

Bonta’s wife Mia Bonta is now a leading candidate to replace Bonta in the Assembly in a special election on Aug. 31.

Earlier this year, Bonta stepped down from the board of his eponymous foundation and it made several new rules, said his campaign spokesman Nathan Click. “Both Bontas are prohibited by the organization from making decisions about how funds are expended,” Click wrote in a message. “Funds are prohibited from going to any organization that employs either Bonta.”

An explosion of donations

News reports in recent months have highlighted both the explosion of behested payments — with [Newsom soliciting \\$226 million in corporate donations to support the state’s pandemic response](#) — and the proliferation of donations to nonprofits run by political spouses.

Charities run by Annie Lam, [wife of Democratic Assembly Speaker Anthony Rendon, received more than \\$500,000 from companies with business before the Legislature](#), the Sacramento Bee reported, and a nonprofit run by [Newsom’s wife received more than \\$800,000 from a dozen corporations that regularly lobby](#) state government. However, those donations were not made at Rendon’s or Newsom’s “behest” so would not be covered by the new rules the FPPC is considering.

One thing the commission may consider changing is how donations are reported if they come through a donor advised fund. That's because such funds can [obscure the original source of a donation, the Los Angeles Times reported](#), raising concerns that donors trying to curry favor with politicians may have found a way to avoid scrutiny. The FPPC is also scheduled to discuss donor advised funds at its meeting Thursday.

The commission has not yet completed its [investigation of Assemblyman Evan Low](#), launched after CalMatters reported that the Democrat from Silicon Valley had stopped reporting donations to the nonprofit affiliated with the Legislature's technology caucus.